

Alabama's School-to-Prison Pipeline

Across America, millions of schoolchildren are being pushed out of the classroom and often into courtrooms and jail cells by disciplinary practices that punish them severely for minor misbehavior. The impact falls most heavily on children of color – cutting short their education and increasing their odds of being incarcerated as adults. Nationally, black children are suspended at 3.8 times the rate of white children. And they are 2.3 times as likely to be arrested in school, frequently for noncriminal rule violations or misdemeanors, including highly subjective offenses such as “disorderly conduct.”

Alabama is among the worst states in terms of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions, expulsions and arrests. A 2015 study found that only one state suspends a higher percentage of its students.* Racial disparities are also apparent in Alabama, where black children are suspended, expelled and arrested at more than three times the rate of white children.

Here are key features of Alabama's school-to-prison pipeline, based on U.S. Department of Education data from the 2013-14 school year (the latest available):

Out-of-School Suspensions

- 61,753 children were suspended (out of a school population of approximately 746,200, including kindergarten and pre-K)
- 112 pre-K children were suspended
- 16% of all black children were suspended, compared with 4.7% of white children
- Black children were 3.3 times as likely as white children to be suspended

Expulsions

- 1,849 children were expelled
- Black children were 3.5 times as likely as white children to be expelled (national average = 1.9)

Arrests

- 3,157 children were arrested or referred to law enforcement
- Black children were 3.5 times as likely as white children to be referred to law enforcement or arrested in school (national average = 2.3)

Black children in Alabama are more than three times as likely as their white peers to be suspended, expelled or arrested.

* Losen, Daniel; Hodson, Cheri; Keith II, Michael A.; Morrison, Katrina; & Belway, Shakti; Are we closing the school discipline gap?, University of California, Los Angeles, Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Rights Project (2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Create school discipline policies that better distinguish between school infractions and criminal behavior.**
- 2. Stop arresting students for disorderly conduct.**
- 3. Ensure school administrators, not police, are responsible for discipline by creating agreements with police departments and court systems to limit school-based arrests and the use of restraints, such as pepper spray and handcuffs.**
- 4. Implement evidence-based approaches to discipline, such as restorative justice programs, that help children overcome behavioral problems rather than push them into the criminal justice system.**
- 5. Implement positive behavior intervention and supports for students statewide.**
- 6. Compile annual reports on the total number of disciplinary actions that push students out of the classroom, based on gender, race and ability.**